Sound like... Disco

On the DVD

TUTORIAL FILES
The individual tracks and the finished, mastered mix of our song are in the **Tutorial Files/ Sound Like Disco** folder

Dismissed as shallow and faddish in its heyday, disco proved the naysayers wrong and turned out to be one of the most enduring popular music genres. We show you how to rock the floor...

Disco music first shook its booty onto the dancefloors of the world in the early 70s. A heady mix of the jazz, funk and soul of the previous decade, this was music written and produced specifically to be played – you guessed it – in the discotheque.

Although they often feature a huge, diverse range of instrumentation, disco tracks nevertheless tend to be fairly 'open', uncomplicated affairs. This isn't to say that they lack substance – far from it – but there is a lack of fuss that makes it fantastic music to dance to.

Since its golden era, disco has had a massive influence on contemporary styles such as hip-hop and house. Countless disco tracks have been sampled and reworked to the benefit of all manner of different genres.

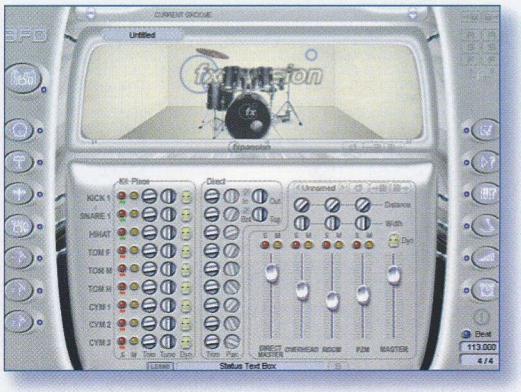
This month, we're doffing our cap to the talents of the prolific production team of Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards – the driving force behind disco heavyweights Chic. Their hit *Good Times* – which features arguably the most recognisable bassline riff of all time – is the inspiration for our track.

Typical elements of a disco track include: electric guitar (often through a wah-wah pedal); punchy, rhythmic basslines; string and brass sections; and layers of vocals. There's generally an electric piano or organ somewhere in there and, of course, solid drumming (often of the four-to-the-floor variety) garnished with a touch of percussion.

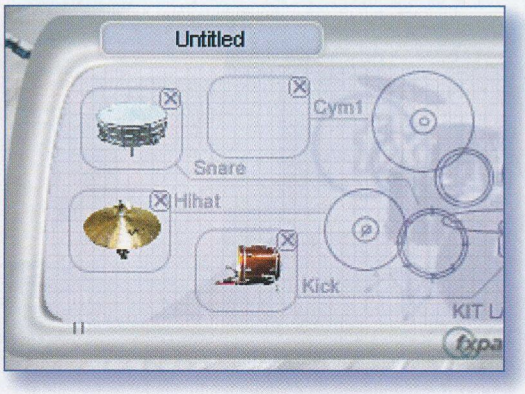
We're going to build up our track from scratch, starting with the all-important beats, then moving on to the equally fundamental bassline. Throwing in some choppy rhythm guitar and enriching the mix with string, piano and organ parts, we'll then layer up the vocals to create a classic disco sound.

Afros and sunglasses are, of course, essential if you want to fully recreate that disco vibe. However, *Computer Music* can accept no responsibility for any injuries caused by over-tight trousers. Disclaimer issued – on with the job. **cm**

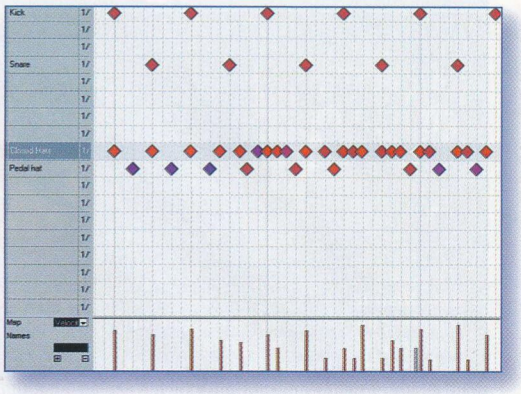
Turn the beat around



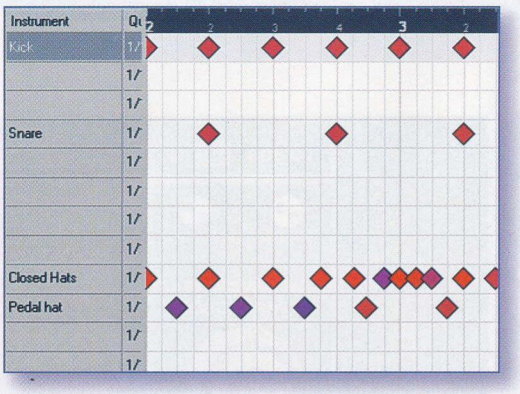
1 We're using FXpansion's BFD to create our drum track. We ReWire it into Cubase (it still doesn't work as a plug-in in Cubase 4), create a MIDI channel and assign the output to the ReWired plug-in. We load in the three drum kit pieces that we require: kick, snare and hi-hats. »



2 When producing disco, it's important to choose the right kick – weight and body sound are essential. **Ayotte Kick 1** provides us with the necessary tonal combination. We also select **Extras Snare 4** and **Ayotte Hihat 1**, which has a nice sizzle to its sound when closed. »

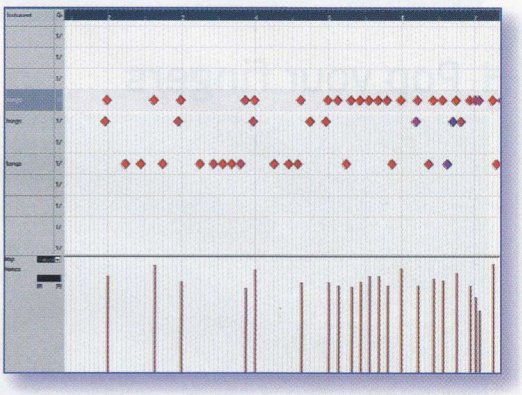


3 Our drum pattern is a typically solid example. The kick drum and snare play alternate beats while the hi-hats do the job of introducing movement and interest. We carefully adjust the velocity values of the hi-hat part to give it accent and feeling. »



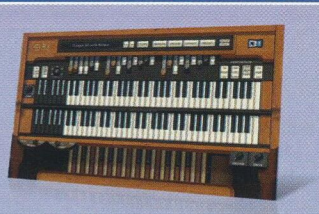
4 Disco tracks often feature four-to-the-floor kick drums (ie, a kick drum on every beat of the bar). Too good an opportunity to miss, we fire in a couple of extra kicks on the second and fourth beats to really give the folks on the floor something to stomp about. (**Drums 113bpm.wav**) »

5 There's nothing like a well-judged percussion part to inspire some overzealous 'shaping' on the floor. We call up an instance of HALion One and load up the **Mixed Percussion** preset. This provides a range of percussive instruments – we focus on the bongos. »

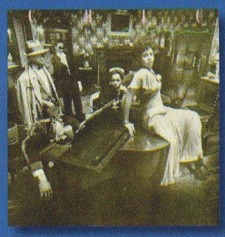


6 Banging away on our MIDI keyboard, we develop the part. Varying the velocity values works a treat here, but the timing is a bit ropey in places so we tighten it up in the drum editor. It's important not to over-correct the part, since relaxed timing is a disco trademark. (**Bongos.wav**)

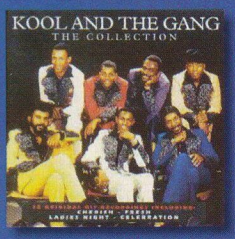
Essentials

	Bass amp	Drums	Organ
HIGH-END	**IK MULTIMEDIA AMPEG SVX £269** PC/MAC Offering four Ampeg amp and six Ampeg cab models, this glorious-sounding plug-in also offers six mic models and eight stomp effects	**FXPANSION BFD £180** PC/MAC Features loads of expertly recorded drums packed into a simple user interface that makes creating great drum tracks a cinch	 **NI B4 II £150** PC/MAC Updated last year and sounding better than ever, this is a superb Hammond B3 emulation. It features a Leslie speaker simulation, natch
MID-RANGE	**LINE 6 TONEPORT/GUITARPORT £102+** PC/MAC GuitarPort/TonePort users can buy the Bass Expansion Pack with 28 amps and 22 cabs	**XLN AUDIO ADDICTIVE DRUMS £150** PC/MAC XLN Audio have packed three complete kits – and more – into a very capable interface	**LINPLUG ORGAN 3 €129** PC/MAC Another B3 emulation, this one also offers a number of 'extra' features that make the instrument that little bit more flexible
BUDGET	**STEINBERG CUBASE 4 AMPSIMULATOR £BUNDLED** PC/MAC If you're a Cubase 4 owner, the built-in AmpSimulator can yield some sweet bass	**STEINBERG HALION ONE £BUNDLED** PC/MAC Another Cubase 4 freebie, the HALion One ROMpler covers almost every instrumental base	**DSK MUSIC B3X £FREE** PC DSK's latest freebie is an organ plug-in that offers delay and flanger effects. It was in beta at the time of writing

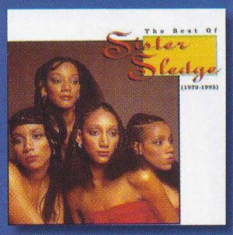
Further listening



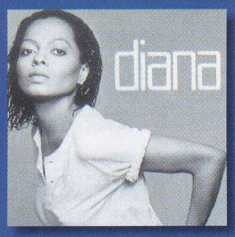
Chic *Risque*
Featuring the hits *Good Times* and *My Feet Keep Dancing*, this album demonstrates the formidable power of the Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards disco machine. With just seven tracks, it's a small collection (as many albums were back then), but it's quite perfectly formed and a must for anyone looking to understand what disco's all about.



Kool and The Gang *The Collection*
Kool and The Gang are behind two of the most recognisable disco tracks ever and both can be found on this greatest hits album. *Celebration* – the soundtrack to every 70s night, birthday or wedding you've ever been to – is a masterpiece, as is *Ladies Night*. Connoisseurs should check out the likes of *Jungle Boogie* and *Funky Stuff*.



Sister Sledge *The Best of Sister Sledge (1973-1985)*
Benefiting from the Midas touch of the Rodgers/Edwards production duo, Sister Sledge have a gamut of hits to their name. *Lost in Music*, *He's the Greatest Dancer* and *We Are Family* are all included in their impressive discography. Just a bar or two of any of these tracks is enough to take you to disco heaven.



Diana Ross *Diana*
As the 70s came to a close, many established funk, soul and rock artists decided it was time to start surfing the disco wave. However, no one did it as successfully as Diana Ross. Produced by Nile and Bernard, *Diana* features two classic singles – *Upside Down* and *I'm Coming Out* – and is the biggest-selling studio album of Ross's career.

Pop your fingers

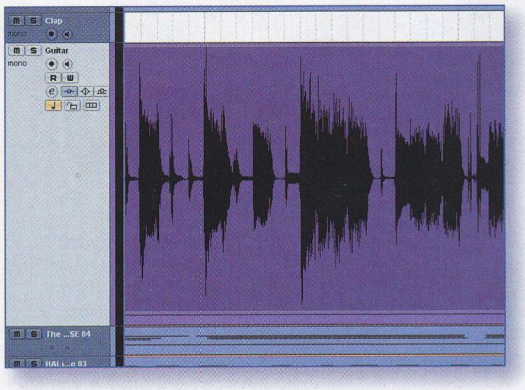
1 A good bassline is an essential component of any disco groove. Taking inspiration from the funkier side of the musical fence, a percussive performance that complements the drumming is the best way forward. We're using IK Multimedia's Ampeg SVX bass amplifier plug-in to create our tone. »

2 Opting for the **Focus B-15** preset, which uses the B-15R amp model, we tweak the EQ to shape the sound. With the **Bass** control set to around halfway, we back off the **Mid** to around a quarter. We turn the **Treble** control right up to three quarters and click the **Ultra Lo** button for added low-end bass emphasis. »

3 Clicking on the **Stomp** button to display the stompbox area, we call up a Compressor stomp effect. This is a very simple affair with just two controls. We set the **Output** level to three o'clock and the **Sensitivity** control to roughly one o'clock. (**Bass.wav**) »

POWER TIP

▸ FUNKY FOOTWORK
We've opted for a pure and clean guitar tone for our track. However, a variety of effects can be used to funk up the disco sound. The most obvious is the wah-wah pedal – a pedal-controlled band-pass filter. If you've got one, great; if not, AmpliTube has a model. Otherwise, a phaser provides great results, as does a sparingly used flanger. Bear in mind that the order in which you place your effects units can really influence the sound too.

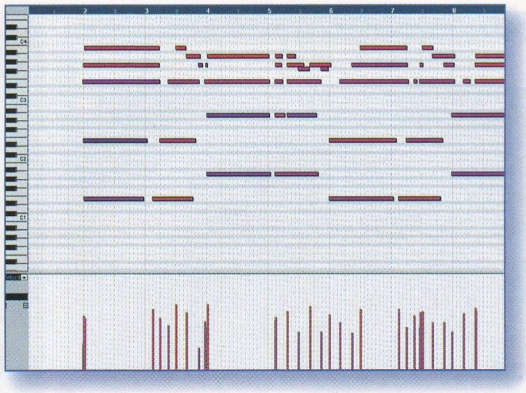


4 The choppy, rhythmic guitar parts prevalent in disco music are influenced, in part at least, by funk. If your guitar has a five-way pickup selection switch, set it to the 'bridge+middle' pickup position. We use plenty of fast flicks of the wrist to create rapid strumming patterns. »

5 To create our guitar tone, we're deploying IK Multimedia's AmpliTube 2. The **Snappy Funk Riff** prese provides us with a terrific starting point – this features two American Tube Clean amp models in parallel. The first passes through a large 4x12 cabinet with Dynamic 57 mic; the second through a 1x6 small combo miked by a Condenser 87. (**Guitar.wav**)

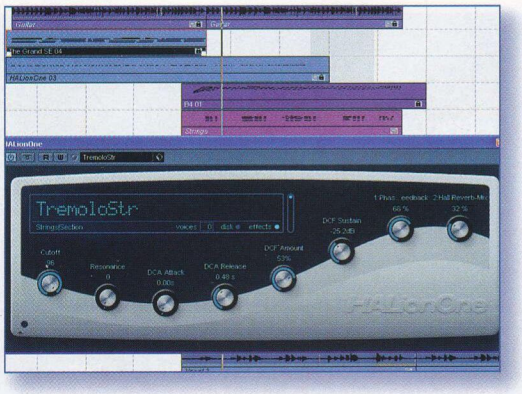
Here comes that sound again

1 Disco tracks tend to be stuffed with instrumentation, and ours is no exception. We add a piano part at the start of the track which continues to crop up here and there throughout the piece. We summon an instance of Steinberg's The Grand SE – a cutdown version of The Grand proper that's both easier on the CPU and the wallet. »

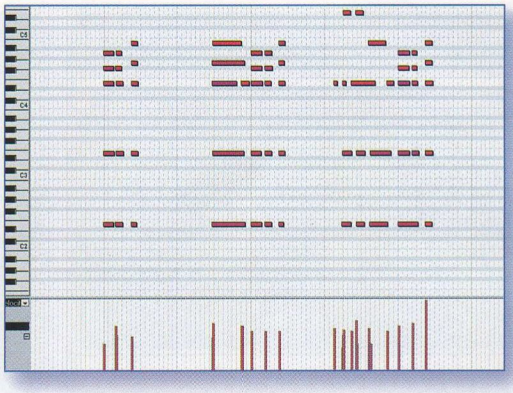


2 We record a simple part that makes use of long, sustained notes and chords. It's tempting to play a busy part with every instrument, but we try to focus on our goal of creating a full but not overly busy mix. (**Piano.wav**) »

3 Sticking with the keyed instruments, we also create an organ part. For this we use Native Instruments' B4 plug-in, an emulation of the famous Hammond B3 drawbar organ. We use the tube amp settings to give the sound some drive, set the speaker rotation to fast and tweak the drawbars to create our tone. (**Organ.wav**) »



4 We call up another instance of HALion One, this time to provide us with some thrilling disco strings. Searching through the presets available to us, we settle for the **TremoloStr** option. »

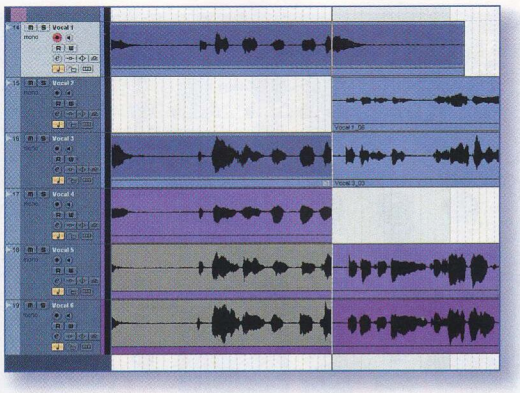


5 We play our string part in on a MIDI keyboard. It's a simple affair primarily made up of staccato stabs. Every so often, a longer note is held, but the majority of the performance focuses on shorter, rhythmic parts rather than fluid passages. (**Strings.wav**) »

POWER TIP

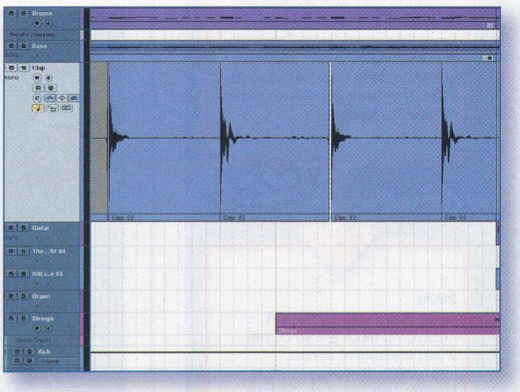
▸ ORGAN-ISE WITH EASE

If you're no keyboard virtuoso, don't panic. It's actually very easy to create credible organ parts, even if you haven't passed grade eight. Create a 'run' up the keys simply by sliding one palm up the keyboard closely followed by the other. Find a couple of notes that work in your song's key and jab away at them rhythmically. Hold simple chords and automate changes in the speaker rotation speed for great authenticity.



6 We make use of six vocal tracks in total, using double tracking and harmony parts to create the depth of sound that befits the style. We take advantage of the high track count to create smooth, seamless transitions between held notes at the end of the chorus and the beginning of the verse. »

7 We use panning to spread the vocal parts across the sound stage – this both widens the sound and aids separation. We create a stereo group channel and route each vocal channel to this. Using the group channel fader, we can adjust the level of the vocal sub mix. (**Vocals.wav**) »



8 We record a bar of clapping to the second and fourth beats of the drum part. This reinforces the snare drum and adds some snap to the sound. We snip the part using the split tool and align each clap directly in time with the snare drum part, for add punch. It sounds OK, but we'll have to do something with it at the mixing stage to really make it work... (**Clap.wav**)

Disco
TIMELINE

1960s – THE ROOTS OF DISCO
The jazz, funk and soul of the 1960s provided inspiration and a musical foundation for the disco scene. In particular, the vocal arrangements of Motown and the basslines of funk contributed significantly to the new style

1979 – GOOD TIMES
Guitarist Nile Rodgers and bassist Bernard Edwards worked their magic to produce what, for many, is disco's defining moment. With a bassline to die for and a hand clap that grabs your booty and shakes it for you, this seminal track still sounds devilishly good today

1979 – THE SUGARHILL GANG
Many disco tracks have been sampled and reworked, but none so much as *Good Times*. The Sugarhill Gang borrowed the bassline for their 1979 hit *Rapper's Delight* – one of the first hip-hop singles ever to be released

1980s – PRODUCTION KINGS
After their enormous success with Chic, artists from every genre wanted to work with Rodgers and Edwards. The likes of Madonna, David Bowie and Duran Duran all achieved massive success when our disco dons rode the faders for them. They were like The Neptunes of their day (but better)

2000
LADY (HEAR ME TONIGHT)
House and disco are so closely linked that they're almost inseparable. Released in 2000, Modjo's *Lady (Hear Me Tonight)* was a massive club hit, but it wouldn't have been half the track it was if it hadn't sampled Chic's *Soup For One*

Don't leave me this way...

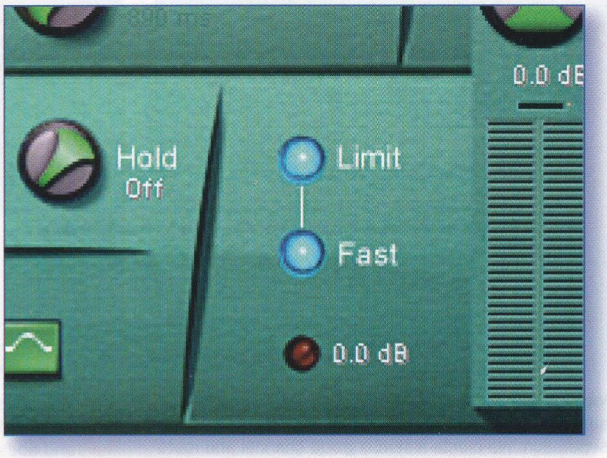
1 We work some engineering magic on the clap to improve it. First, we call upon Cubase's own AmpSimulator plug-in. We set the **Amplifier** to Crunch, **Cabinet** to Cabinet 2, and the **Lo** and **Hi** damping values to 0. With the **Drive** value at 2.8, our clap now has a bit of tasty bite. »

2 To further augment the clap sound, we add some reverb. We create an FX Channel and insert Cubase's RoomWorks plug-in with the reverb **Time** set to 812ms. Finally, we use one of the sends on the clap channel to send the signal to the reverb plug-in. »

3 As the vocal performances are all fairly restrained, we choose not to add any compression to them individually. Instead, we insert an instance of Sonalksis SV-315 Stereo Compressor across the vocal group channel and squeeze the whole lot very gently – just enough to bind the vocals together a little better. »

POWER TIP

▸ DISCO DUCK?
Certain instruments tend to benefit more from compression – bass guitars, for example, generally sound better with a bit of squishing – but vocals are a different kettle of sonic fish. If you can avoid squeezing all of the dynamics (and often feeling) out of a performance by keeping the compressors in the cupboard, then go with it. You'll find that this will give you an airier, more natural mix. Good mic technique helps greatly in achieving this goal, so anything your vocalist can do to help here will result in a better recorded performance.



4 We use an instance of Sonalksis SV-315 on the drums group too. Again, it's very gentle but enough to make a difference, and this time we use the **Fast** option too. We also send some of the snare signal to the FX channel to benefit from the reverb. »

5 The T-RackS mastering software emulates premium bits of analogue kit and can be used to inject a spot of warmth into a track. We use very light compression on the final mix and a suggestion of EQ in the higher frequencies.

NEXT MONTH: Klaxons